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Abstract

The "virtues" and "defects" of both present English spelling patterns and proposed spelling reforms are examined in this article. In lieu of reform, the author proposes that new spellings be accepted as the demand is overwhelmingly felt. An enumerated series of observations deals largely with phonetic and spelling interrelationships. (RI)

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Obstacles to Spelling Reform

William J. Stevens

Reform the spelling of English? Read Mr. Stevens' reactions to this perennial question before you answer! The author is Professor of English, University of Akron, Akron, Ohio.

Annd whase wilenn shall þiss boc
efft oþerrsiþe writenn,
Himm bidde icc, þatt het write rihht,
swasumm þiss boc himm tæcheþþ
All þwerrtut, affterr þatt itt iss
uppo þiss firrste bisne,
Wiþþ all swillc rime, als her iss sett,
wiþþ allse fele wordess,
Annd tatt he loke wel, þatt he
an bocstaff write twiȝȝess,
EȝȝwhÆr þær itt uppo þiss boc
iss writenn o þat wise.
Loke he wel þatt het write swa,
forr he ne maȝȝ noht elless
Onn Ennglissh writenn rihht te word;
þatt wite he wel to soþe.[1]

SO WROTE ORM, the father of English spelling reformers, in his *Ormulen* (about 1200 A.D.). The book is dull, but there are scraps of it found in another manuscript—with a normal spelling.

Orm's "reform" was not, so far as I know, followed by anyone else. And this seems to have been the fate of all the well-meaning reformers that have set up the "only proper and sensible way" to spell English. Largely—there have been a few exceptions—whether the reformers' schemes have been minor or all-encompassing, whether their new alphabets are modifications of the one we now use or completely different, based on shorthand or Greek—they really do not make much difference. They write, they somehow get printed, and they are forgotten.

For although the interest seems high (and the publicity good), the way of the reformers has been discouraging. They seem to have had little difficulty in concocting spelling systems and alphabets better than the ones we now use; but their total effect has been piddling. The feckless Orm set the pattern.

Why so dismal a record? Surely, it is not hard to point out weaknesses in our present spelling system—and the reformers have done so. They have attacked "silent letters" as in "ni*gh*t," there being more than one way of spelling the same sound, as the *sh* sound in "sugar," "*sch*ist," "tis*s*ue," "ma*ch*ine," "ra*ci*al," "men*ti*on," "se*ss*ion," and the English "conne*x*ion"; and they bemoan the years wasted in learning so illogical a system. (Our spelling, we have been told, accounts for the superiority of the Russians, who have—as we have also been told—a phonetic spelling.)

So both what is wrong with our present English spelling system and what is to be done about it have been made clear: If we spell as we pronounce, English spelling would become regular and simple; therefore, all we have to do is spell as we pronounce.

The logic is unassailable. Alphabets, therefore, have been invented to permit us to write down every sound that the reformer recognizes. Societies have been organized to simplify our spelling. Governments, both Parliament and Congress, and individuals in these governments have from time to time been interested

[1](And whoso will wish to write this book over again, I command him that he write it correctly, just as this book teaches him all the way through, in the way that it is in this first example —with all such rhymes as it is here given, and with just as many words; and that he take care that he write a letter twice, everywhere that it is so written in this book. Let him take care that he write so, for he may not otherwise write the word correctly in English; that he must truly know.)

in such reform (in the United States, one thinks of Theodore Roosevelt). Yet our spelling has remained largely unchanged for three centuries.

Could it be, then, that the reformers are in some way mistaken? Possibly English spelling is not very bad after all? Or possibly the reformers and their reforms are not too good? It seems again time to give some of the arguments that led at least one famous linguist to say that he would consider reform "an utter disaster."

1. *The present English spelling system is really not very bad:* For example, "silent letters," such as the *-n* in "condem*n*," may waste space and time. But in the derivative "condemnatory" the *-n-* is pronounced and would have to be restored even if taken away from *condemn*. *Damn* and *damnation* are another pair exactly like this, and there are many others.

Again, the *-gh-* in "ni*gh*t" is not pronounced in the United States; but neither is the final *-e* in the popular *reformed spelling* "nite." For this word the reformer drops two silent letters, picks up one that is equally silent—and for the most part spells *bright*, *sight*, and *sigh* without much thought of reform.

2. *The present English spelling separates homonyms:* This is one of the most popular arguments of the anti-reformers. But in all fairness it is not a very good one. It assumes that spelling such three different words as *pear*, *pair*, and *pare* in the same way, say *payr*, would lead to confusion of meaning. But at present one spelling, *plate* covers a multitude of meanings from "dinner plate" to "home plate" to "plate with gold." *Plate* is not at all exceptional; most words in English have more than one meaning, and these meanings are clear from context, as they would be for *payr*.

3. *English makes little use of punctuation for pronunciation:* The most used symbol we now have is the apostrophe when it shows a contraction: *don't* for *do not* (*dont* would probably be pronounced differently). The "apostrophe for possession" has no effect on the pronunciation, and so often is improperly added or omitted by those weak in punctuation. We also use the hyphen—a few the dieresis—to show the pronuncation of such words as *re-elect* (this hyphen seems to be fading in *cooperative*). English is almost completely free of such marks found in other languages as the acute, grave, and circumflex accents, the cedilla, the umlaut, the tilde, the macron, the breve, and many others.

4. *With a phonetic spelling we would not only spell the way we pronounce, we might pronounce the way we spell:* At first glance, some would think this all to the good. Even our present system, because of earlier reforms, has led us to discard some historical pronunciations in favor of false etymologies. So we have inserted a *-b-* in "de*b*t," although the word comes into English from the French *dette* (Chaucer has *dette*), not from Latin *debitum*—and now some try to pronounce the *-b-*. Likewise, the *-l-* in "fau*l*t"—another word from French (*faute*) and not Latin (*faltum*)—is now frequently pronounced.

But much more important, a person could force his own habits of pronunciation, if he were in a position of some authority, on others. For example, one grade-school teacher of mine in New York City insisted that we say something like *ah-ten-ti-on* for *attention* because it was "spelled that way." But we knew better; out of her grip, we returned to the usual *uh-ten-shun*. Phonetic spelling might not be very harmful in this way, however. Granted that we could all agree on the same pronunciation.

5. *Previous reforms have not been outstandingly wise:* This last negative argument is all I wish to give in favor of our present system. But, for one, the dropping of the *-e-* in "judgement" has never been fully accepted; the odd combination *-dgm-* and the wide use of *judge* have

been too strongly against it. The seemingly more innocent dropping of the *-ue* in the words like "catalog*ue*" has had more success; but even here there is resistance both based on elegance and on the need to restore the *-u-* in "catalog*u*ing" and "catalog*ue*r." And picnic is now spelled universally without the original final *-k* although this must be restored in *picnicking*.

Finally, some words ending in *-re* (still so spelled in Britain) have been reformed to *-er*. So we now have *meter, theater* (often spelled *theatre* when elegance is wanted); but we have to shift the *-r-* back to its earlier position beside the *-t-* in words like *metrical*. Surely, the dropping of *-re* in favor of *-er* is at best a small gain. Like the dropping of the *-u-* in such words as "hono*u*r" and "favo*u*r," it serves mainly to separate the written language of the United States from that of Britain and Canada—perhaps more desirable in the time of the War of 1812 than in the days of NATO.

* * *

Our present spelling, then, has its virtues. Reformed or "phonetic" spelling has its defects. To begin with the trivial:

6. *There is no real reason to assume that a phonetic spelling system is particularly useful:* The methods and the vocabulary of written English are not very close to those of speech. What I am writing here is not very much like what I would say, and that Cicero spoke the Classical Latin he wrote when he was talking over a hard day at the Senate with his wife is doubtful. Certainly, his Vulgar Latin contemporaries, the founders of the Romance languages, did not.

But vocabulary use is not the only difference between speech and writing. Yet, with their sole interest being in pronunciation, none of the popular "reformers" seems to have considered imitating tone, pauses and stresses as a part of their reforms. All of these are very important to speech.

7. *No language has ever been spelled purely phonetically:* Indeed, the writing of some languages—Egyptian hieroglyphs, Modern Chinese, Amerindian picture writing—makes no attempt to approximate speech. And none of the languages now using the Roman alphabet is spelled phonetically. It is held that Castilian Spanish comes pretty close to it, and it has been held up to us as a model. But, without going through the whole Spanish spelling system (or investigating Latin-American pronunciation): *v* and *b* are identical in their pronunciation; *u* has two different pronunciations in "*u*no" and "c*u*idado," and it is not pronounced at all in such words as "g*u*erra" and "q*u*erer." It is still true, phonetically, that English spelling is pretty bad.

8. *English has never been spelled phonetically:* This is not, of course, of any particular importance to Modern English, except that some reformers have pointed to the past of our language and give the impression that in spelling, at least, we have degenerated. But in Old English, say around the year 950, the letter *g* was used for three or four different sounds. The different *th* sounds of "*th*is" and "*th*ink" were spelled pretty indifferently with either of the Old English letters *b* or *o*. It would not be difficult to give more examples.

9. *Phonetic spelling looks queer:* There are some—very possibly the same group that would like to explain nuclear fission with Chaucer's vocabulary—who consider English to be sanctified. On this basis alone, they resist all change. They rage against such spellings as *thru, tho,* and *nite* not because these "reforms" are relatively silly and minor but because they are innovations. Of this breed was Boswell. He—quoting Samuel Johnson who had said that English should have a "Saxon *k*" after a final *-c*—expressed the hope that Johnson's authority would "stop that curtailing innovation by which we see *critic, public,* &c., frequently

written instead of *critick*, *publick*, &c." (The Anglo-Saxons, by the way, very rarely used *k*. This letter comes to us mainly from Old Norse.) Boswell's modern kind fume at such advertising eye-catchers as *Kandy Koted Korn Kracklies*. And they have their influence.

10. *Reformed spelling would obscure etymologies, hence the relation of English to other languages:* This is another of those arguments that may seem better at first than it really is. It is true that English has borrowed many words from French, Spanish, Italian, or from their ancestor, Latin (to say nothing of Greek, Old Norse, or Algonquin). Generally, we have changed the pronunciation of the words we have borrowed to conform with our English speech habits, but we pretty much keep the original spelling. Anti-reformists hold that by changing the spelling also we would lose sight of the word's relationship to the original language. Thus, a phonetic spelling would not only make English harder for the foreigner to learn; it would result in making English less useful as a universal langauge (another vested interest in English), since foreigners now recognize in English many words that are familiar to their original vocabularies.

But this argument overlooks the fact that the meanings of these borrowed words have often changed also, either since coming into English or in the language from which they were borrowed —perhaps as much as the pronunciation. A careful study of what has happened to French words in English (or in French after they had been borrowed into English) might well favor a spelling that obscured a relationship that is as misleading as it is helpful.

11. *Reformed spelling would obscure the relationships of English words to each other:* Within the English language itself, the objections to obscuring the etymology of a word are more valid. There are quite a few series of words of like meaning, now connected by their spellings, that would find themselves widely separated if they were spelled phonetically. The different pronunciations in English of the Greek stem *path-*, for one: "*path*os," "*path*etic," and "tele*path*y" are very different. Likewise, the spelling of the differently pronounced Greek prefix *tele-* in "*tele*pathy" and "*tele*gram" now keeps these words together in a way that reformed spelling would not. In short, our present spelling is of some use for vocabulary building and recognition (as well as for listings in dictionaries); reformed spelling is not.

* * *

But the foregoing arguments against spelling reform I have admitted to be minor. I do not consider the rest of these so:

12. *If spelling is to be reformed to reflect pronunciation, whose pronunciation is to be reflected?* Possibly, Americans may choose to overlook the pronunciations of the English, Scots, and Irish; certainly many of our reformed spellings would be no reform for them. Even the "silent *-gh-*" is pronounced in some Scottish dialects, making a "reform" like *nite* for *night* or *tho* for *though* quite useless, even downright confusing. Justly, then, the English or the Scots might well adopt their own reforms, and a letter to Glasgow, or from, that is now completely intelligible might call for a translator's services. Even Canada could go its own orthographic way; our present minor pronunciation differences, say of words like *about*, seem to be enough to give rise to countless witty remarks.

But within the United States itself there are hundreds of regional dialects and subdialects. Will Tidewater Virginia be content to spell in a way that reflects not its own pronunciations but those of San Francisco? Is there much hope that Texans will spell according to the speech habits of Alaska? We have our regional pride and snobbishness, and we gibe at

the "Brooklyn accent," the "Southern drawl," or the Midwestern "hard *r*." Which standard of pronunciation—and one must be set up for a phonetic reform of spelling—shall we follow? For me, in my college classes, the answer will be relatively easy—mine. (Since I am from the East and my classes are made up largely of Midwesterners, this may prove a little hard on my students.)

13. *No one speaker uses the same pronunciation time after time:* There are two major reasons for this: stress and/or tone; context. The oft hit-at "carelessness" has really nothing much to do with it. The whole history of English illustrates the tendency of the language toward becoming a one-syllabled language.

So far as stress goes, I myself vary the phrase spelled *don't you* in three major ways. I may say, rather infrequently, *dohnt you*, but I more usually say *dohn chew* or *dohn chuh*, even—and without apology—*dohn cher*. Our present spelling suits all of these well enough; a phonetic spelling would force me to choose, time after time, from three or four possibilities, or it would not be phonetic. For another example, we generally pronounce *the* in two different ways. The rule is to say something like *thuh* before consonants (*thuh cake*), *thee* before vowels (*thee apple*). But *thee* is also used before consonants when there is a heavy stress: "That was *thee* Mr. Jones, Chairman of the Board!"

So far as illustrating spelling affected by context goes, the rule of *thuh* before consonants, *thee* before vowels offers one good example. An even better one, however, can be found in the pronunciation of the so-called "vowel *r*" of many English, Eastern, and Southern speakers. For some of these speakers, this *r*, found after vowels in such words as "far," "hard," and "word" (not before vowels, as in "red," "scrape") has gone; for these speakers *far* is regularly *fah* or *fa-uh*. For others, mostly those in the Northeastern dialects, including many New Yorkers, this *r* will not be pronounced in some places, but it is pronounced in others. If *car*, for example, is followed by a consonant, these speakers normally say *cah:* "His *cah* was wrecked." But if the next word begins with a vowel, then they say *car:* "His *car is* (or frquently *cah riz*) fixed." Moreover, they use *car* when the word is given heavy stress: "Call that heap a *car?*"

And not only this. For this latter group of speakers any word ending in an unstressed vowel behaves in much the same way. A few years ago, a New York City radio announcer said clearly: "*Novuh* (Lou Nova) comes into the center of the ring." "*Novuh* hits Louis!" "*Nover* is hurt!" The same dialectal trait was shown in President Kennedy's pronunciation of *Cuba*. And when we, for I am of this dialect, get excited, we all say: "What's the big *ideer!*" It is very hard for us to remember that what is called "dropping *r*'s" is considered elegant by many speakers who normally do not drop them, but that the same group usually considers that adding *r*'s to words like *idea* is vulgar and uneducated. Both the dropping and the adding come from the same speech habits.

Further, some like the late Fred Allen will put *r*'s into words that have an "*aw* sound"; they pretty regularly say *orful* (spelled *awful*) and pronounce *orphan* and *often* identically (*orfin*). Most of us in public places try to avoid this; too many do not like it. Probably we could manage to avoid it in our writing also, but not if we spell phonetically.

In such pronunciations as these, it can be hard to tell whether one will be praised or damned. Of our last four Presidents two, F.D.R. and Kennedy, were of the "*r*- dropping, *r*-adding" group; two, Truman and Eisenhower used the *r*, as Midwesterners would say, "where it belonged."

14. *Reformed spelling can lead to, or increase, linguistic snobbery:* For this, the example I have just given of the "vowel *r*" and of some of the reactions to it might well be enough. But for a couple of examples more. Witness the horror, first, that is occasioned by the "dropping of the *-g*" (which in reality was never there phonetically) in such present participles as "hopi*ng*" (*hopin*). Yet the pronunciations *hopin, goin,* and the like, are both ancient and to be expected phonetically. Those who "drop the *-g*" do so in unstressed syllables only, keeping *singin* and *sinnin* quite distinct—in their speech at least.

A like bit of criticism sometimes arises over the question of elegance as opposed to sloppy pronunciation in the beginning sounds of such words as "*wh*ich," "*wh*en," and "*wh*y." Some keep *which* and *witch* distinct; others do not. Largely the preference here seems to belong to one's own pronunciation, permitting the other possibility to be labelled either "over-fastidious" or "Slurvian"—whichever suits one best.

But in all seriousness, must those who are said to sin with *r, -ing,* and *wh-* confess their errors in their spelling? Or must they spell "phonetically"—even though it is the phonetics of another's speech—lest they (even those who are Harvard graduates) be considered uneducated by someone from Indianapolis?

15. *Phonetic spelling is difficult:* Perhaps this is obvious by now. But it might be well to keep in mind the new British spelling system, Anglic, that is meant for the use of children. In this, purportedly phonetic, representation, the letter *e* serves for quite different sounds in *red, her* and *the;* the letter *o* serves for both *not* and *for;* for most speakers the *or* in *for* and the *eor* in *George* are identical, but in this phonetic spelling *for* is spelled *for,* keeping its *-or* unchanged; *George,* however, is metamorphosed into *jaudz,* losing both *o* and *r* (but both *r*'s are kept in "Bernard"). Actually, whatever may be its merits, Anglic is not phonetic. And it is often misleading, as when it gives *to* —usually *tuh*—the same vowel as *look;* and *day* the same vowel as *their.*

16. *Reformed spelling, even if practical, would be very expensive:* First, we would be faced with the re-education of those who have already finished their schooling, or have the necessity of going on for years publishing two differently-spelled versions of a newspaper or a periodical, or have an interim period during which children would learn both alphabets. Probably, children would always have to learn to read both alphabets, unless we reprint the older works —the Bible, Shakespeare, Dickens, Hemingway, and Faulkner—in the new spelling. Then it becomes interesting to contemplate the possible quarrels arising over the phonetic spelling of Shakespeare (preserving, of course, his word play and puns). Even more difficult would be the transcribing of the various dialects attempted by Mark Twain in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.*

* * *

It appears then that the only way to ultimate reform—if that is what we must have—will be the acceptance of a gradual infiltration of new spellings as the demand for them becomes overwhelming. Rather than "phonetics" only one thing is really needed to implement this infiltration: the removal of the emphasis we now place on a fixed, "correct" spelling. If Shakespeare could write as he did and still feel free to vary the spelling of his own name, why must we, the slaves of the spelling bee, now place so much weight on *to* versus *too; their* versus *thier?* If we cared less, our spelling would improve more.

Or we can continue doing much as we have done, using the dictionary to check our spelling—at least not having to worry over whether we have to look up a word in a spelling that accords with the pronunciation patterns of Massachusetts or Iowa.

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